

The International Institute for Middle-East and Balkan Studies (**IFIMES**) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, regularly analyses events in the Middle East and the Balkans. Below we have provided the most relevant and interesting sections from the comprehensive analysis entitled "**Israel between the peacemakers and the warriors**" which was carried out in the light of the early parliamentary elections in Israel scheduled for 10 February 2009.

ISRAEL AND 2009 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

ISRAEL BETWEEN THE PEACEMAKERS AND THE WARRIORS

On 10 February 2009 Israel will hold its eighteenth (early) elections to the Israeli parliament (Knesset) since the country proclaimed its independence in 1948. The elections are based on a proportional electoral system in which the entire country constitutes a single electoral constituency.

The 5,278,985 eligible voters will cast their votes at 9,263 polling places (including 194 hospitals and 56 prisons) in order to elect 120 members of the single-chamber parliament. 34 political parties and party lists will be competing for seats in the parliament. The main political parties or coalitions are: Kadima, Likud, Labor, Israel Beytenu, Shas, Mafdal, Meretz, Gil, the Arab List etc.

This year's early elections, which are the fifth during the past 12 years, were triggered when Kadima Chair and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni failed to form a coalition government and after she did not give in to the blackmail exerted by the Shas religious party which demanded greater social support and exclusion of the Jerusalem status from negotiations with the Palestinians.

Analyses of the last three elections have shown that the direct reason for the dissolution of governments and early elections was always related to the Palestinian issue. After the last elections in 2006 and the historical one-sided withdrawal from Gaza the then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was not able to calm down the spirits within his own party. Together with his followers within Likud (Ehud Olmert, Tzipi Livni) he founded a centre-right party Kadima.

The 2001 elections were the consequence of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's failed negotiations with the Palestinians (Camp David II). A similar episode happened in

1998 to the then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after the negotiations with the Palestinians in Way River failed.

CONTINUED CRISIS OF ISRAELI POLITICS

Generally, it has been observed that the Israeli politics have been facing a continued crisis since the peace agreement with the Palestinians was concluded in early 1990s. The Israeli electoral body is very fragmented and at the same time bipolar, i.e. black and white. Politicians are divided into two blocks: those striving for peace and those trying to prevent it. Notably, their political parties offer no alternative programmes for the social, economic and employment-related problems.

The forthcoming elections differ from the previous ones in the following:

1. Lack and disappearance of the charismatic historical politicians with the second- and third-rate politicians coming to the forefront
2. Non-existence of joint projects and programmes – there are 34 political parties and lists competing for the seats in the parliament. In comparison, from among the 30 competing parties in 2006 only 12 were elected with the lowest turnout ever (64%).
3. The traditionally largest parties will find it difficult to form the government on their own. The relative winner of previous elections was Kadima although it was founded in the same year as the elections were held (2006).
4. Israeli elections have turned into a referendum on foreign policy (especially on relations with the Palestinians) at the detriment of the country's internal affairs and the deteriorating economic crisis.

From the above facts it may be concluded that the forthcoming elections represent the continuation of the radical political turnover which has lasted since 1977 when Likud defeated the Labor Party which had been in power since 1948. The turnover was repeated in 1992 when the Labour Party regained the leading position in the Israeli politics.

Likud, which disintegrated in 2005, is expected to return to the political scene with this year's elections, though only as a relative winner since it will not be able to form the government on its own. The forthcoming elections will draw a new political map of Israel and determine the destiny of the three main parties (Kadima, Likud and Labor).

It is not only the destiny of Minister Tzipi Livni at stake but also that of Kadima which has opted for the centre-oriented path and selected some important personalities from the right and the left wing. The voters will be deciding also on the destiny of the Labor party which has been present in the political scene for years.

Analysts are forecasting the party's stagnation due to a lack of ideological and social identity in the Israeli society.

The question is whether Likud will become the first or the second largest party and whether Benjamin Netanyahu will become the "formateur" or part of the coalition under Kadima's leadership. There is a theoretical possibility that Likud may compose the government without Kadima and Labour if it gains support from religious and immigrants parties (Shas, Israel Beytenu, Mafdal) and from Gil.

POLITICAL FAVOURITES AND THE PEACE PROCESS

All political parties, especially the major three, have put the Palestinian issue and the peace process high on the agenda of their political programmes, without any significant differences among them.

The Labour party which is the oldest political party in Israel (established in 1930) has a rather realistic attitude to the peace process. During its government the Peace Accords were signed between PLO and Israel in Oslo in 1992.

The Labor party is committed to peace and it is ready to talk not only to the Palestinian self-government, but also to Hamas under three conditions: **1.** Hamas must recognise Israel; **2.** disarmament; and **3.** recognition of peace agreements concluded between Israel and the Palestinian self-government. However, Labor will probably not be able to compose the government on its own and will have to be a part of a wide coalition. Its approach to the peace process will depend on its main coalition partner.

Likud was founded in 1973. Its ideological roots date back to the liberal and nationalistic movement Betar led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky. It represents the main opposition to Ben Gurion's party Mabai (today's Labor party). The party won power in 1977 when Menahim Begin defeated Shimon Peres and the Labour party for the first time since the state of Israel was established in 1948. Likud traditionally opposes Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories, although it was the first party to sign peace agreement with Egypt in 1979. Similarly in 2005 the then Prime Minister and Likud leader Ariel Sharon one-sidedly withdrew Israeli troops from Gaza. Likud's present leader Benjamin Netanyahu is very uncompromising on the Palestinian demands although that will not necessarily be his position if he wins the elections – during his term of office in 1998 he entered into serious negotiations with Yasser Arafat.

Kadima (in Hebrew it means "forward") was established four years ago. During a very short period of time it became one of the largest political parties in Israel's political scene. The party is committed to the peace process and the peace plan. It believes that the one-sided withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 opened the door to the

continuation of the peace process. Kadima's victory at the elections will mean that Israel will continue one-sided withdrawals from some West Bank areas and finally draw the eastern borders of Israel. Kadima opposes any form of co-operation with Hamas in the peace process.

PUBLIC OPINION POLL

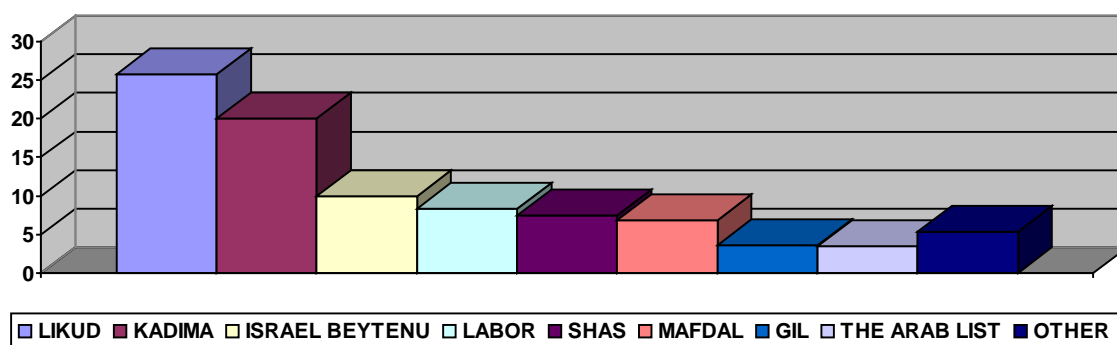
Data on the sample:

- The sample: random, three-stage
- Size of the sample: 1,123 respondents (male and female citizens of lawful age)
- Methodology: telephone survey
- Period: 18th to 23rd January 2009
- Degree of reliability: 95%
- Control: 10% of the sample
- Standard deviation +/-3
- Territory: State of Israel

- WHO WOULD YOU VOTE FOR IF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS WERE HELD TODAY IN ISRAEL?

LIKUD	25,8%
KADIMA	20,1%
ISRAEL BEYTENU	10,0%
LABOR	8,4%
SHAS	7,5%
MAFDAL	5,8%
GIL	3,6%
THE ARAB LIST	3,5%
OTHER	15,3%

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International Institute for Middle-East
and Balkan Studies (IFIMES) – Ljubljana

Directors:

Bakhtyar Aljaf

Zijad Bećirović, M.Sc.



Mednarodni inštitut za bližnjevzhodne in balkanske študije
International Institute for Middle-East and Balkan Studies
Tivolska 50, p.p. 2795, 1001 Ljubljana, Slovenia

